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Belling the Ring

Abstract: This chapter analyzes the bell curve’s presence in the deep structure of school evaluation and measurement, as well as, unconsciously, in the minds of teachers and educators. The bell myth shapes a reality of worthlessness for most children. It establishes academic achievement as the only worth-scale in education, granting worth to a small and predetermined number of students while excluding the remaining majority.

On the subject of education's common sense, it is worth noting that formal education, particularly in public schools, has become in the 20th century a synonym for “education.” For most people – children, parents, politicians, teachers, journalists – education is what takes place in a school; with its physical structure (a large, grey, concrete edifice partitioned into rooms and long corridors, much like a factory, hospital, prison, etc.); its idiosyncratic actions (a lone adult facing a group of children, rationed hours of planned teaching, short recesses, examinations, homework, etc.); and the social functions it fulfills. All of these embody education. Common sense also tells us that school’s role, through which it realizes its social purposes, is embodied first and foremost in the curriculum. The academic and public dispute on the nature of the curriculum has been raging for decades. Conservatives, clerics, and neo-capitalist liberals, who usually hold the political power to dictate and affect educational content in the present era, preach traditional curricula that highlight religion, science, math, and finance studies. They normally prefer curricula with a nationalist and/or religious, chauvinistic, pro-technological, and pro-western bias. The manner of teaching is of little interest to these approaches, so long as it produces the desired, measurable results.

Critical theorists prefer to highlight alternative teaching methods that promote critical thinking, creativity, and individual and social consciousness. To them, education is more than formal teaching, and the pedagogy they seek is dialogic and empowering. Both camps, however, agree on one point: school experience is a learning experience that generates knowledge in students, and sometimes in teachers. Knowledge is the goal of education, and in spite of disputes on how to create and/or transmit it, and fierce struggles around “What knowledge should be transmitted and/or created?” and “What is the purpose of the knowledge?” still one thing is agreed upon – knowledge is the purpose of school.

If generation of knowledge in students’ minds forms the operational definition of school, then, like all output-producing operations, it can be measured. At this juncture, critical theorists, together with open education advocates, leave the discussion – clearing the stage for the bureaucratic, conservative policymakers who try and implement their business-administration logic in education. To their view, if the education system possessed a procedure for infiltrating children’s minds by using, say, a brain detector helmet that could measure the emergence and operation of new concepts, this would be a spectacular victory; so spectacular that it could define education as a “science” and convert it